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Postgraduate Dissertation

An exploration of the factors that shape the status of the speaking skill in the Greek state Primary school

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Patras, Greece, June 2019
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An exploration of the factors that shape the status of the speaking skill in the Greek state Primary school

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Olga Gkitsa, An exploration of the factors that shape the status of the speaking skill in the Greek state Primary school

Abstract

The focus of this dissertation is on the speaking skill in the context of state Primary school education in Greece. It specifically aims at exploring the standing the skill holds in the curriculum and the various factors that shape current speaking teaching practices. Furthermore, it investigates whether the speaking skill becomes neglected as pupils progress from the 1st to the 6th grade and delves into the array of factors that lead to a shift of focus from oral practice to an over emphasis on the receptive skills. In doing so, a critical examination of the Greek educational system regarding EFL is attempted both in terms of curriculum and syllabus design, as well as teaching practices. Concerning research methodology, a qualitative method is used in the form of interviews, which are conducted with experienced state school teachers. The interviews revolve around four research questions, namely the importance assigned by the teachers themselves to the speaking skill, the extent to which the prescribed instructional materials promote speaking practice, their views on why-if at all-the skill in question tends to be overlooked in favour of the receptive skills and the action taken in order to overcome difficulties faced by the pupils in oral practice. The findings of the study indicated that the emphasis placed on the speaking skill is more pronounced in the first three grades. The study identified linguistic issues, inhibition, time constraints and instructional materials as the main reasons this transpires. It it recommended that speaking teaching practices should be adapted with the view to addressing the negative affective variables that pupils deal with in their oral production. Also, instructional materials should be accordingly adapted so as to provide ample and motivating opportunities for oral practice. Finally, the research concludes that a balanced practice of all skills is necessary for effective language learning. Given the importance of the study and its implications for state Primary school speaking teaching practices, it is suggested that a larger scale research be conducted in order to arrive at safer and more generalizable conclusions. However, it is aspired that the findings of the present study prove helpful and illuminating in the endeavour to improve current speaking teaching practices.
Keywords

Speaking skill, Primary school, Greek state education, receptive vs productive skills, speaking practices
Μία έρευνα των παραγόντων που διαμορφώνουν τη σημασία που δίδεται στην προφορική δεξιότητα στη διδασκαλία της Αγγλικής στο ελληνικό Δημόσιο Δημοτικό Σχολείο

Ολγα Γκίτσα

Περίληψη

Η παρούσα έρευνα εστιάζει στην προφορική δεξιότητα στη διδασκαλία της Αγγλικής στο ελληνικό Δημόσιο Δημοτικό σχολείο. Σκοπεύει ειδικά να ερευνήσει το κύρος που κατέχει αυτή η δεξιότητα στο πρόγραμμα σπουδών καθώς και τους παράγοντες που διαμορφώνουν τις παρούσες διδακτικές πρακτικές του προφορικού λόγου. Επιπλέον, ερευνά εάν η διδασκαλία της προφορικής δεξιότητας παραμένει σταθερά καθώς οι μαθητές προχωρούν από την πρώτη στην έκτη τάξη του σχολείου και μελετά εις βάθος τους παράγοντες που καθορίζουν τη σημασία που δίδεται στη διδασκαλία της προφορικής δεξιότητας. Στο πλαίσιο αυτό, επιχειρεί να εξετάσει με μία κριτική μάτι το ελληνικό εκπαιδευτικό σύστημα σε ό,τι αφορά τη διδασκαλία της Αγγλικής ως Ξένης Γλώσσας. Τόσο όσον αφορά το πρόγραμμα σπουδών και τη διάρθρωση της ύλης όσο και τις παρούσες διδακτικές πρακτικές. Αναφερόμενα στη μεθοδολογία έρευνας, χρησιμοποιήθηκε ποιοτική μέθοδος με τη διεξαγωγή συνεντεύξεων με έμπειρους καθηγητές Αγγλικών στον δημόσιο τομέα. Οι συνεντεύξεις είχαν ως βασικό άξονα τέσσερα ερευνητικά ερωτήματα, και πιο συγκεκριμένα τη σημασία που οι ιδιοί οι δάσκαλοι αποδίδουν στη διδασκαλία της προφορικής δεξιότητας, τα μέτρα που λαμβάνονται προκειμένου να αντιμετωπιστούν οι δυσκολίες των μαθητών που επικρατούν τον προφορικό λόγο. Τα αποτελέσματα της έρευνας κατέδειξαν ότι η εμφάνιση που δίνεται στην προφορική δεξιότητα είναι εντονότερη στις πρώτες τρεις τάξεις του Δημοτικού. Η έρευνα κατέδειξε γλωσσικά και ψυχολογικά εμπόδια,
περιορισμένο χρόνο καθώς και ζητήματα που άπτονται του διδακτικού υλικού ως τους βασικούς λόγους για τους οποίους συμβαίνει αυτό. Προτείνεται μία προσαρμογή των διαδακτικών πρακτικών ώστε να αντιμετωπιστούν τα αρνητικά συναισθήματα των μαθητών όταν χειρίζονται τον προφορικό λόγο. Επιπροσθέτως, το διδακτικό υλικό θα πρέπει να προσαρμοστεί ανάλογα προκειμένου να παρέχει ευκαιρίες εξάσκησης του προφορικού λόγου που κινητοποιούν τον μαθητή. Τέλος, η έρευνα καταλήγει με το επιχείρημα ότι μία ισορροπημένη εξάσκηση όλων των δεξιοτήτων είναι απαραίτητη για την αποτελεσματική εκμάθηση της γλώσσας. Δεδομένων των σημαντικών προεκτάσεων της παρούσας μελέτης για τις διδακτικές τεχνικές της προφορικής δεξιότητας στο ελληνικό δημόσιο Δημοτικό σχολείο, προτείνεται η διαξαγωγή μίας ευρύτερης έρευνας προκειμένου να εξαχθούν πιο γενικά συμπεράσματα. Παρά ταύτα, τα αποτελέσματα της αναμένεται να είναι χρήσιμα και διορατικά.

Λέξεις – Κλειδία

προφορική δεξιότητα, Δημοτικό σχολείο, ελληνική δημόσια εκπαίδευση, δεκτικές και παραγωγικές δεξιότητες, διδακτικές τεχνικές του προφορικού λόγου
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**Introduction**

The importance of the speaking skill in the foreign language classroom is widely acknowledged. Undeniably, speaking is one of the most essential skills to be developed and cultivated in order for effective communication in the target language to take place. Especially in the context of teaching the foreign language to young learners, the spoken component constitutes both the starting point and the cornerstone of language learning. The idiosyncratic nature of the active skill of speaking necessitates the teaching of the particularities of oral communication through materials that actively engage young learners and respond to their specific learning characteristics.

However, many studies have indicated that oral language development has been neglected in the EFL classroom in favour of the practice of the receptive skills as pupils progress from the 1st to the 6th grade of Primary school. This is attributed to a variety of teachers’, learners’, and environment related factors that have a negative impact not only on the attitude of learners towards speaking but also on the quality of oral development as a whole.

Hence, this study aims at exploring the multitude of factors that shape the status of the speaking skill in the content of the Greek state Primary school. In doing so, it also investigates the perspectives and attitudes of the teachers regarding their own teaching practices as well as the nature of the difficulties that the learners face in their effort to acquire the speaking component of the target language. With the view to gaining a deeper understanding of the aforementioned issues, a qualitative research was the method of choice on account of its facilitating the gathering of rich data as well as the capturing of the experiences of those involved in the process. Thus, interviews were conducted with five state Primary school teachers. The research questions revolve around four issues, namely the importance assigned by the teachers themselves to the speaking skill, the extent to which the prescribed instructional materials promote speaking practice, their views on why-if at all- the skill in question tends to be overlooked in favour of the receptive skills and the action taken in order to overcome difficulties faced by the pupils in oral practice. The findings of the research are expected to be illuminative not only for practitioners, but also for curriculum designers and all those involved in the foreign language learning process.
There are five chapters in the present thesis. In **Chapter 1**, the theoretical background underpinning the basic concepts of the research is established and the educational context is presented in brief. **Chapter 2** lays down the theoretical foundations of the speaking skill with particular reference to young learners and the state primary school context. Also, it provides a review of related studies carried out on the same subject. **Chapter 3** outlines in detail the method of the study, the research questions, the sample and the procedure. **Chapter 4** presents the findings of the research in relation to the research questions set and presents extracts from the interviews that are discussed and interpreted according to the existing literature. Finally, the thesis concludes with **Chapter 5**, where the implications of this research, as well as a few limitations and tentative suggestions for further research are discussed.

### 1. Theoretical Framework

**Introduction**

The first chapter of this thesis attempts to lay down the theoretical underpinnings upon which the research under discussion was created. First, a thorough account of the educational setting is provided with specific mention to the curriculum requirements and specifications. Then, the particular teaching paradigm is identified in the context under scope, in terms of its characteristics and assumptions followed by a description of the principles underlying the PEAP program in the first grades of Primary School. Then, an account of the learners and the learning environment is
offered. Finally, the chapter concludes with a thorough discussion of the challenges and constraints that impact the teaching context.

1.1 The educational setting

1.1.1 The curriculum

TEFL instruction in a Greek Primary state school context is based on the latest version of the Integrated Foreign Language Curriculum that has been implemented since 2014 and is common for all foreign languages taught at Greek state school, thus, employing a generic approach to language learning (Dendrinos, 2014). Aside from this major breakthrough that ensures a much needed uniformity and continuity in foreign language instruction en masse, another novelty of this version is its accordance with the proficiency levels outlined in the Common European Framework of Reference for languages (CEFR, 2001). Hence, by determining the “skills-specific descriptors per language level” (Dendrinos, 2014), it aims at assigning not only a coherent structure but also common objectives in EFL instruction.

On account of the “highly centralized” (Triandafyllidou & Gropas, 2007, p. 3) nature of the Greek educational system, the Ministry of Education and the Pedagogical Institute are solely responsible, among other things, for the instructional materials and the curriculum. Pertaining to its design and structure, it is undertaken by the Institute of Pedagogical Policy (www.iep.edu.gr) and supervised by university experts.

The IFLC was developed within the framework of the National Curriculum and is an endeavor to “create and adopt a well-articulated foreign language education strategy” (Dendrinos, Zouganeli and Karavas, 2013, p. 15) and lay down the foundations for modern foreign language practices in keeping with the “contemporary educational and social advances” (Anastasiadou, 2015, p. 114). This is especially mirrored in the significance the curriculum assigns to principles such as multilingualism and multiculturalism, with the former aiming at bringing forward the differences between different languages and the latter at fostering an appreciation of the various cultures at play in the Greek educational context (Tzotzou, 2014). This is particularly true in the multicultural reality of Greece and
the resultant social diversity reflected in the classroom that has been brought about by the last two decades of immigration (Damanakis, 2005). In this light, curriculum adaptations towards appreciation of otherness and a “creative exploration of the cultural anthropogeography” (Sifakis, 2013, p.127) of the state school classroom have been made necessary (Paleologou, 2004). This ever-changing cultural reality constitutes the overarching principle of curriculum guidelines, calling for “the necessity for its reconceptualization” (Anastasiadou, 2015, p. 114). Also, it is underpinned by the tenets of the communicative approach with the goal to promote learners’ critical thinking and social interaction. Differentiated instruction is also highlighted as another focal point so as to tap into every learner’s potential against the backdrop of a heterogeneous class (Efremidou, Frouzaki & Reppa, 2005).

Finally, it would be an omission not to mention the emphasis placed by the curriculum on the cross-curricular approach (Chryshohoos, Chryshohoos, & Thomson, 2002) by motivating students to acquire knowledge from different subjects thus establishing “interdisciplinary cooperation” (Anastasiadou, 2015, p. 117). Such an approach puts forth intelligibility and effective communication through teaching the “normative structures of the language” (Sifakis, 2009, p. 233).

### 1.1.2 Identification of the teaching paradigm

The identification of the dominant paradigm that informs teaching practice in the context under scope, necessitates a consideration of some of the “complexities of the global English language phenomenon” (Fay, 2008, p. 147), namely the growing number of distinct English varieties and the different contexts in which they are used.

The global status and function of the English language along with the fact that it is a “key prerequisite for “surviving” in today’s globalized world” (Sifakis, 2009, p. 232), account for an increasing number of varieties of the language (Fay, 2008). Nevertheless, in the context of the Greek state school British English and General American English are the most widely-accepted varieties taught. Hence, learners in Greek state schools are exposed to the “long-established varieties of English”
(Fay, 2008, p. 161), that is to the “correct and appropriate” language as it is spoken by native speakers.

Research has shown that the paradigm informing state school instruction is that of Teaching English as a Foreign Language (TEFL) (Sifakis & Fay, 2011). In this case, language teaching can be viewed as a “culture-specific endeavour” (Fay, 2008, p. 151) and has a close relation to the cultural content of the target society. Thus, this paradigm is characterized by a “culture-specific” (Fay, 2008, p. 168) approach, where the culture content that is taught is a typical reflection of the culture of the target societal context of native speakers. This is illustrated by the fact that traditions such as British Christmas customs, habits and Bonfire Night to name but a few, often inform curricular objectives in the prescribed textbooks.

1.1.3 The learners

The learners addressed in this study attend a Greek state primary school in a suburb in Athens. Their age spans from 6 years to 12 years old. Regarding their level of English, it commences at A1 “Beginner” and aims to take learners to the A2 “Pre-Intermediate” level, according to the classification outlined by the Common European Framework (CEFR), (2001). The majority is monolingual, Greek native learners; there are also pupils of Albanian and Syrian origin who make up about 2% of the student body. On the whole, they exhibit a genuine enthusiasm for the subject and participate quite eagerly.

1.1.4 The PEAP curriculum

The PEAP program, which is essentially the teaching of English to young learners in the Greek state Primary school, constitutes a component of an enriched curriculum introduced by the Ministry of Education (Dendrinos, 2013). This piloting stage was implemented on an experimental basis at first and it has now been incorporated in all school curriculums offering English as a subject from the 1st grade. As Dendrinos, Zouganeli and Karavas claim, this has been an attempt to
facilitate “the achievement of the European objective for multilingualism and plurilingual citizenry” (Dendrinos, Zouganeli and Karavas, 2013, p. 15).

This latest educational innovation actually mirrors Greek parents’ and learners’ keen interest in learning foreign languages not only as a means to communicate, but most importantly as a prerequisite for their educational and professional development.

The PEAP curriculum aims to “introduce young learners to the oral mode of the foreign language” (Dendrinos, 2013) by engaging them in interactional activities through relevant instructional materials that mirror their interests. It is relevant in this research to note that the development of oracy and the aim to help pupils understand and produce spoken language lie in the foundations of the program. Therefore, the proposed lessons have been designed with the utmost goal to cultivate the oral skills through tailored activities that prompt the use of interactional language through collaborative work. Thus, the curricular material aims to be aligned with the communicative paradigm and oral speech functions constitute the “tool” that facilitates language use and production (Dendrinos, 2013).

1.1.5 Constraints

It should be noted that the teaching context in Greek state schools raises some serious constraints that may obstruct the smooth implementation of the syllabus and impact the quality of the lesson as a whole. To begin with, there is a lack of “class homogeneity” (Tzotzou, 2014, p. 61), that is mainly attributed to the fact that the overwhelming majority of learners receive private tuition at frontisteria and thus come to school exhibiting different levels of target language knowledge and skills. Furthermore, in primary school there are no diagnostic tests available in order for students to be classified into different proficiency levels.

As a matter of fact, foreign language instruction in the Greek educational reality has been largely based on the assumption that teaching should prepare students for language proficiency examinations with the ultimate goal to obtain a certificate. According to Cummins and Davison (2007), Greece earns the highest ranking in Europe in the number of candidates sitting for such exams. Such an explicit orientation toward exam preparation has led to a thriving private sector of
language institutes (Mattheoudakis & Nicolaides, 2005). Learners are driven to intensify their foreign language learning through “heavy-duty exam preparation (Sifakis, 2009, p. 237) and thus become “instrumentally motivated” (Alexiou & Mattheoudakis, 2013, p. 112). The fact that, to date, the possibility of obtaining certificates is exclusively offered by private language schools leads to a widespread belief that English is taught more effectively in the private sector; a fact that inevitably has dire implications not only for the lesson’s quality at schools but also for the role of the teacher herself who may feel “underestimated or even rejected” (ibid, p. 112).

The situation is compounded by other factors, such as large, mixed-ability classes and the restricted time allocated to the subject (1 period for the first two grades and 3 periods for the remaining four per week) which is not deemed enough to cover the syllabus requirements. What is more, there are many lost hours owing to several factors, such as excursions and holidays, resulting in little exposure overall to the target language in the classroom (Tzotzou, 2014).

Another notable constraint relates to the instructional materials prescribed by the Ministry. Their effectiveness and suitability have come into question as it is argued that, despite the writers’ best intentions, they are not updated as regularly as they should in light of the advancement leaps in this field. After all, as Karavas (2004) suggests, it is necessary that textbooks be subjected to an ongoing evaluation so that their suitability is assessed.

What is more, the lack of updated instructional materials applies to the audiovisual equipment and facilities available as well. It is common knowledge that the vast majority of state schools are not equipped with the necessary technological resources to supplement teaching, for example whiteboards, internet, computer lab, overhead projector etc.

Finally, there is the matter of limited funding that state schools receive, which comes at a stark contrast to the affluent private language institutes (Alexiou & Mattheoudakis, 2013). Consequently, teachers often feel demotivated as they do not have access to neither up-to-date teaching resources nor the indispensable in-service training.

**Conclusion**
The first chapter attempted to lay down the theoretical framework on the basis of which the present study is designed. To this end, the educational setting was presented and the curriculum requirements with regards to teaching English to young learners were thoroughly discussed. The teaching paradigm for the context under scope was identified and some notable constraints that may hinder the learning process were provided.

2. The speaking skill

**Introduction**

The second chapter of this thesis concerns the speaking skill and the ways in which it is taught in the Greek Primary school setting. More specifically, firstly, it attempts to explore the active skill of speaking through a more theoretical perspective. Then, special reference is made to its role in TEYL. Also, an account is provided of the way in which the skill is handled in the instructional materials both in the first and last grades of school, followed by a critical reflection of the activities offered. Finally, a review of related studies is presented.

2.1 An overview of the speaking skill

Undeniably, speaking is one of the most important skills to be developed and cultivated in order for effective communication in the target language to take place. In fact, according to Nunan (1995), mastering the speaking skill counts as the most important aspect of learning a foreign language, since success is measured based on the ability to hold a conversation in the target language. It is a common consensus that the main goal of EFL teaching should be to give learners the ability to use the language efficiently and correctly in communication (Davies & Pearce, 2000). In keeping with the communicative paradigm, Hill (2004) claims that the principal objective of the speaking component in any language course is to enable the students to produce oral discourse that will facilitate language production outside the confines of the classroom. Set against this prevailing view, there is the mounting realization that teaching practice should be informed with
the view to teaching the particularities of oral communication that will enable learners to engage in “real speech” (Hughes, 2002, p. 65).

However, this research aims to show that oral language development has been largely neglected in the classroom in favour of the teaching of the receptive skills. This may be partly attributed to a past misconception that the cognitive skills involved in writing will, automatically and with no additional conscious effort, transfer to analogous oral communication skills (Chadney, 1998). Hence, the teaching of the receptive skills has been considered for years to hold the lion’s share of TEFL focus. This misconception has also been noted by Richards and Rodgers (2001) who claim that such traditional beliefs were the main culprit that led to a negligence of the speaking skill in the classroom.

Nevertheless, recently, many an effort has been made to reinstate the speaking skill to its rightful place in EFL teaching. Ur (2000) and Hughes (2002), among other scholars, regard it as an indispensable part in building a solid foundation in language acquisition and caution practitioners against neglecting it in their teaching practice.

### 2.2 The speaking skill in Teaching English To Young Learners

The introduction of primary EFL in the overwhelming majority of European countries, including Greece, and its incorporation in the curriculum from the first grade, account for an unprecedented expansion of Teaching English To Young Learners (TEYL). What differentiates TEYL from general TEFL are the unique characteristics that young learners possess. To cater to them teachers need to employ creative methods and bring in an innovative spirit when managing the classroom (Richards, 2008). Young learners need to be provided with a personalized learning experience in a supportive, motivating and secure classroom context.

With regard to instructional speaking practices in TEYL, it is important that they are viewed though a multidimensional perspective. To begin with, teachers need to bear in mind the defining characteristics of young learners so as to facilitate their oral development. As Dendrinos (2015) supports, their lack of inhibition and their extrovert disposition distinguish them from older learners making it easier for them to engage in oral production. Additionally, as Cameron (2001, p. 1)
notes, it contributes to their attaining a more native-like accent. Despite the fact that a variation of method is necessary so as to accommodate their short attention span, other characteristics, such as their low affective filter and their ability to acquire the sounds and rhythms of the target language faster than older learners may alleviate the challenge of TEYL instruction. Also, physical activity is an unequivocal requirement in order for them to make sense of their surrounding environment. What is more, interaction is a guiding principle that facilitates language acquisition (Bouniol, 2004). In fact, according to Zouganeli (2004, p. 200), language development can be considered as “the internalization of social interaction”, an “interactive process toward meaning making” (ibid, p. 198). On the same note, Cameron (2001) recognizes the significance of meaning in TEYL and singles it out as a “guiding principle” that needs to permeate all interactional discourse. In fact, as Schwab (2011, p. 4) maintains, for speaking tasks to align with the “communicative endeavor”, they should engage learners in meaningful interaction by creating the circumstances for “real language use” (Sougari, 2000, p. 18) to take place. Brown (2001) further corroborates this point by underscoring that young learners engage in oral speech through activities that are relevant for their real-life situation in their immediate environment.

2.3 Speaking activities in the PEAP curriculum

Based on the assumption that the development of oral communication is of utmost significance in the TEYL classroom, the speaking skill is highly valued in the PEAP curriculum for the first three grades of Primary school and forms the basis of teaching practice. Representative samples of the activities described are provided in Appendix II (p. 50).

The proposed tasks aim at supporting the children’s oral skills development by engaging them in oral discourse through which they “will seek to understand and to share meanings” (Cameron, 2001, p. 70). The activities are designed with the aim to provide ample opportunity for speaking practice that is spontaneous and purposeful (West, 2000). In order to achieve this, learners are exposed to authentic material that is age appropriate, mirrors their interests and engages their imagination (Rost, 2011). Therefore, the curricular material is based on thematic areas such as animals, toys, family and special customs (Dendrinos, 2013). Each activity is structured in a game-like fashion and allows for the “use of new
utterances and stretches of talk in a variety of situational contexts” (ibid, p. 8). The presentation and practice of the new language is achieved through pedagogic techniques, such as role-play, mime and other kinds of tasks of an action orientation. After all, as Brown (2001) reiterates, the stimulation of all five senses is necessary for language acquisition and can be realized through sensory aids and physical activity. Games, in particular, and other activities that involve movement, have a positive association for children, since they respond to their innate need for physical activity (Curtain & Dahlberg, 2010). Positive association, therefore, will establish the desired brain patterns that reinforce the acquisition of the language elements that learners are exposed to (Caine, 1997, as cited in Curtain & Dahlberg, 2010).

What is more, storytelling is used extensively in the curriculum. According to Cameron (2001), stories are a very appropriate media of language teaching to young learners both as a vehicle for vocabulary development and as pronunciation practice. Learners have the chance to listen to selected fairytales in a simplified version and then engage in either questions and answers or a retelling of the story. Both techniques are extremely beneficial for speech development. The former encourages interactional language use in a creative way as learners produce oral speech that is meaningful and contextualized (Brown, 2004). The latter facilitates vocabulary acquisition, develops learners’ creative thinking and brings in the element of enjoyment and personal accomplishment (Kayi, 2001).

Another key component in the speaking material offered is songs and chants. Music, in general, creates a “positive affective climate” (Long & Porter, 1985, p. 211) and is loved by young learners who, due to their low affective filter, participate enthusiastically. As Linse (2002) suggests, songs and chants constitute indispensable resources in TEYL, as they provide simple patterns of lexical chunks which children can repeat and in turn acquire as “formulaic language” (Zouganeli, 2004, p. 236). Repetition is also acknowledged by Sougari (2000) as a key element in early speech production, who maintains that learners should be engaged in more tightly controlled oral practice in the early stages of language acquisition before they reach the stage of freer production.

2.4 Speaking activities in Grades 4, 5 and 6 of Primary school
To begin with, the authors of the textbooks purport that speaking practice continues to be of major significance and endeavor to incorporate it in every lesson (Efremidou, Frouzaki and Reppa, 2005). Some representative examples of the activities described below are provided in Appendix III (p. 53).

Speaking tasks function as a warm-up stage prior to a reading or a listening task, where learners are called upon to draw on their background knowledge and experiences in order to engage in a more free oral production (Rost, 2002). Particularly as a pre-listening task, they often serve as a brainstorming activity in order to enable the activation of prior schemata. In the case of a pre-reading activity, they involve pupils in purposeful strategies such as prediction and inferencing thus fostering their autonomous thinking and communication skills (Mazzante, 2012). As a post-reading activity, they encourage learners to either come up with an alternative ending or think of a more suitable title for the reading passage. Therefore, by tapping into their “creativity and imagination” (Kern, 2000, p. 111), oral production is facilitated.

Speaking tasks are more frequently used as a means to revise previously taught vocabulary items and consolidate grammar phenomena. In the latter case, mechanical drilling practicing grammatical accuracy is often used as a technique especially in the 4th grade. Despite the fact that this behaviorist technique is now seen as obsolete and not consistent with the teachings of the communicative theory, it continues to be put forward as a way to practise grammatical items that are deemed more challenging by the teacher (Pinter, 2006).

However, the amount of communicative activities offered outweighs the behaviorist ones. A representative example of the former is pair and group work tasks that are primarily used as a means to practice the oral skill. Such activities involve learners in “the communication of information (Hill, 2004, p. 344) and allow for interaction to occur in the social context of the classroom (Littlewood, 1981). Some of the advantages of group and pair work include the fact that both the amount and variety of oral speech production is increased. This is especially true in instances of small group work that serves not only to strengthen ties between learners but also to provide more speaking opportunities in a more “supportive environment” (Long & Porter, 1985, p. 211).

Other communication techniques offered by the material include games and role play. West (2000), among others, has recognized the benefits of the former in that
they provide meaningful and motivational oral practice that is far more productive than what is offered by oral drilling. Purposeful communication is achieved, participation is maximized and activation of both cognitive and interactive strategies is ensured (McDonough & Shaw, 2003).

Finally, speaking activities in the form of role play are provided by the course books especially in the 5th and 6th grade as a means to practise both grammatical and lexical items. Despite the fact that role play tasks require more careful planning and may be met with unwillingness to participate on the part of the older pupils, Hedge (2000, p. 280) claims that they can offer fruitful language practice both in “transactional and interpersonal communication” as well as “provide an effective bridge between the classroom and the ‘real’ world” (Crookall, 1988, p. 8).

2.5 A critical reflection of the speaking activities

Progressing to the last three grades of Primary school, it appears there is a noticeable shift of focus from the speaking skill being the foundation of teaching practice in the first three grades, to it relegation to a skill of lesser importance compared to reading and writing (Al Hosni, 2014; Brown, 2001). Having said that, it is by no means absent from the instructional materials, as it is integrated in all the lessons in more ways than one as seen in the previous section.

In an attempt to critically evaluate the activities promoting the speaking skill in the Primary school, it is important to consider West’s (2000) distinction between two separate areas of speaking practice, namely “speaking to learn” in juxtaposition to “learning to speak”. The former is of a structural orientation and views speaking practice primarily as a means of achieving grammatical and phonological accuracy “in uttering well-formed sentences” (West, 2000, p. 42). Form-focused exercises and the repetition of structures through drilling techniques are the preferred modes of practice and there is a tight control of the speaking output. Pupils are encouraged to produce grammatically correct sentences with a firm focus on accuracy at the expense of “real speech” (Hughes, 2002, p. 65) in more unplanned communication circumstances.

Hence, it can be argued that a portion of the speaking activities offered in the last 3 grades fall into the above mentioned category. Speaking is treated mainly as a
vehicle for vocabulary and grammar consolidation through activities that do not encourage spontaneous interaction in the classroom (Hedge, 2000). Despite the fact that there are tasks offered that incorporate some communicative elements as described in the previous section, the majority of them do not encourage the use of authentic language and thus are unlikely to equip learners with the communicative competence skills needed to use language effectively outside the context of the classroom.

On the other hand, as far as speaking tasks in the curricular material for the first 3 grades of school are concerned, they undeniably exemplify the “learning to speak” orientation. In this case, spoken interaction prioritizes fluency instead of accuracy. Speaking is regarded as a communicative endeavor where all learners are regarded as “possible interlocutors” (Schwab, 2011, p. 7) in “goal-oriented activities” (Walsh, 2002, p. 5). Pupils are engaged in meaningful communication and the control of the speaking output is noticeably lessened. Apart from the repetitions and chants that they are involved in – a crucial stage of language acquisition in TEYL –, the tasks offered take into consideration their distinct characteristics and their learning style. Interactional language use is prioritized and speaking is regarded from the perspective of an “interactive process towards meaning making” (Zouganeli, 2004, p. 198). What is more, the speaking input learners are exposed to is contextualized, since their learning is heavily dependent on what they are able to experience in their immediate surroundings (Moon, 2000). Communicative techniques such as games, songs, chants and stories are predominantly used throughout the curriculum as means of speaking practice ensuring that the development of oracy is facilitated.

2.6 Review of related studies

2.6.1. Studies related to affective factors

To begin with, Park and Lee (2005) conducted a qualitative research that aimed at examining the relationships between L2 learners’ anxiety, self-confidence and oral performance. In doing so, it identified anxiety as being among “the most negatively
influential affective variables” (Park and Lee, 2005, p. 197) that prevents learners from successfully mastering the components that lead to effective oral production. On the other hand, the findings of the study suggest that high self-confidence can be positively correlated with oral performance. The study concluded that in order to facilitate foreign language learning, special attention needs to be paid to the learners’ affective domains by trying to build confidence and “remove a significant amount of anxiety” (ibid, p. 206).

In a similar vein, Tanveer’s (2007) research singled out anxiety as being the primary factor that has an impact on the oral skill for foreign language learners. He went so far as to claim that “it can exercise a detrimental influence on second/foreign language learning and communication in the target language” (ibid, p.63). He purported that practitioners should not only “recognize that anxiety is a major cause of students’ lack of success in L2/FL communication” (ibid, p. 63) but also take measures so as to help pupils overcome such feelings of unease. He proposed adopting a communicative approach and applying the appropriate strategies to help learners counteract these negative feelings. Ultimately, he claimed that in order for active participation in the classroom discussion to be ensured, a friendly and learning-supportive environment should be established.

2.6.2 Studies related to other factors

In her qualitative research entitled “Speaking Difficulties Encountered by Young EFL Learners”, Al Hosni (2014) attempted to explore the oral communicative competence of learners in Oman and, very much like the present study, investigate the reasons why “oral language development has largely been neglected in the classroom” (ibid, p. 22). Through the data obtained from observations, interviews and curriculum analysis, she identified linguistic difficulties and mother tongue use as the main speaking difficulties encountered by grade 5 pupils of Primary school. More specifically, she attributed these difficulties to learners’ “insufficient vocabulary repertoire” (ibid, p. 26) and limited grammar and syntactical knowledge. According to her findings, the aforementioned factors caused the learners to struggle in their efforts to form sentences and resort to the mother tongue when they tried to communicate their ideas. Moreover, curriculum analysis revealed that “the form is more emphasized than the meaning” (ibid, p. 27) in speaking activities and textbook
tasks do not encourage pupils to use language communicatively. Hence, her recommendations towards rectifying the situation include a rethinking of the instructional materials with the addition of more appropriate tasks with a focus on meaning. Finally, she proposed that teachers be trained so as to be able to integrate speaking into the other skills and teach it communicatively.

Another study conducted by Lukitasari (2003) centered on the fostering of learners’ strategies in overcoming their speaking problems. The results obtained from his research were consistent to those of Al Hosni’s (2007) and indicated that mother tongue use and linguistic factors were the main obstacles in speaking practice. More specifically, he concluded that, despite adequate instruction, learners had not mastered the appropriate vocabulary and grammar skills to aid them in their speaking practice. Data collected through observation revealed that pupils struggled to find the correct vocabulary item to get their ideas across. Also, syntax and grammar were another source of difficulty, since their weak sentence building skills hindered their oral production.

**Conclusion**

The second chapter of this thesis discussed the speaking skill from a theoretical perspective and explored the ways it is handled both in current teaching practices and the instructional materials as well. Then, it attempted to critically evaluate the activities offered on the basis of the extent to which they promote effective oral practice. Finally, a comprehensive review of recent studies pertinent to the speaking skill in the context of Primary education was provided.

### 3. Research Design

**Introduction**

The third chapter of this thesis concerns the description of the research under scope. First, there is an account provided of the particular method that was chosen followed by an analysis of the sample and the instruments employed. The chapter concludes with a report of the procedure that was observed throughout the research.

**3.1 Method**
The main objective of this thesis is to explore the standing that the speaking skill holds in the curriculum throughout Primary education in the Greek state school setting. In doing so, it also aims to investigate the reasons why and the extent, if at all, to which it tends to be somewhat neglected as pupils progress from the 1st to the 6th grade. Therefore, after reviewing the existing literature, the following four research questions were formulated:

- To what extent do EFL teachers believe that the speaking skill is neglected as pupils progress to the last three grades of school, compared to the first three ones? If so, where is it attributed?
- Is the speaking skill adequately covered in the activities offered by the textbooks in all grades of Primary school?
- What kind of difficulties do pupils face in practicing the speaking skill in the classroom?
- How are difficulties in teaching speaking dealt with in the classroom?

According to Flick (2009), a careful reflection of the nature of research questions is necessary in order to come to a decision on the most suitable method for the research at hand. There are three methods available, namely the qualitative, the quantitative and a mix between the two. The quantitative method is informed by the principles of positivism and it primarily serves to assess cause and effect relationships between variables (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994). On the other hand, the qualitative paradigm views research from a constructivist perspective and brings forward the relationship between the researcher and the objects of the study. As Morcom (2014, p.21) puts it, “qualitative research methodology endeavours to understand the world of the participant by situating the researcher with all their values and assumptions in that world”. In other words, its objective is to gain an insight into the personal experiences of the participants. What is more, this type of research presupposes a relatively small sample so as to ensure a more meaningful and personalized data collection (Jackson, Drummond & Camara, 2007). Finally, the mixed method is a methodology that involves collecting and analyzing data by integrating both qualitative and quantitative research tools (Miles & Huberman, 1994).

Regarding the research at hand, the questions that were formulated aim at exploring teachers’ personal standpoints and notions on the issue of the speaking
skill and the way it is taught. Hence, given the complexity of the issue and the prospective variability of the answers, it is understood that the qualitative paradigm will best facilitate the collection of the appropriate data that will ultimately lead to a deep understanding of the teachers’ perceptions (Beaumont et al, 2008; 2011). This argument is also endorsed by Flick (2004) who contends that in the case where the collection of holistic information and more detailed data is needed, the most suitable research paradigm to employ is the qualitative one.

Yet another argument for the use of a qualitative approach is the fact that there is already a plethora of studies pertaining to the teaching of skills and teachers’ opinions that are carried out using quantitative methods. This “apparent preponderance” (Hughes, 2002, p.116) of quantitative methods in the discipline of language study has also been noted by Benson et al (2009) who, among others, suggest that overall around 20% or less of research in the field is carried out by qualitative means. Thus, a change in approach and a broadening of perspective was maybe called for. After all, as Silverman (2013) suggests, teachers’ viewpoints are, more often than not, too complex and individual to be constrained through a quantitative approach.

### 3.2 Sample

The sample of the research consists of five English teachers who teach in state Primary schools in Athens and Crete. All hold permanent posts and have been teaching for a minimum of 9 years, a fact attesting to their experience. All of them, with the exception of one, hold postgraduate degrees in Education and participate in teacher training programs organized both by their schools or by private institutions. Some relevant demographic data are provided in Table 1 below.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Teachers</th>
<th>Sex</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Years of teaching experience</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Teacher 1</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The teachers were chosen in accordance with Morse’s (1998, p. 73) criteria of what constitutes a “good informant”. According to him, participants in this type of research should not only be knowledgeable on the subject at hand, but also have the necessary experience that will allow them to provide informed and well rounded opinions. In qualitative research, participants are regarded as capable individuals able to reflect upon and clearly express their values and beliefs. Another factor that needs to be taken into account when selecting the sample is their readiness and willingness to participate (Dodman and Jones, 2011). For this reason, the teachers that were selected work in schools of the same area with the exception of one who lives in another city but who, nonetheless is readily available to accommodate the needs of this research.

As far as sampling size is concerned, unlike quantitative research where size aims at establishing statistical significance and is thus predetermined, in the qualitative paradigm there are no overall formal criteria for determining it or rules to suggest if it small or large enough. Instead, as Tuckett (2004) purports, it is the ‘richness’ of data collected that holds much more weight than the number of participants involved. Patton (2002) concurs this hypothesis by adding that the ideal sample size is one that accommodates the needs of the research in terms of its context and purpose. In this case, a relatively small sample size is preferable since it facilitates the handling of the “many hundreds of bites of information from each unit of data collection” (Richie et al, 2013, p. 117).

### 3.3 Instruments

After careful consideration of the qualitative instruments available, interviews were selected as the most suitable means for data collection. They are deemed as a particularly useful tool for capturing the participants’ perspective more deeply since they allow for an insight into their individual experiences (McNamara, 1999). Spoken “narrative” is the basis of most qualitative data, where that narrative is most often gained through a direct encounter between the researcher and the participant. It is through this very encounter that rapport and trust can be developed and lead to a solid data collection.
Moreover, the interviews are semi-structured and comprise mainly open-ended questions that are designed to stimulate the participant to “reconstruct their subjective theory” about the issue under study (Flick, 2009, p. 156). The questions are formulated with the view to guide the conversation but also allow for participants to provide information that may be important to them, but is not necessarily reflected in the questions. In this way, the data collected makes it possible to reach an understanding of the “details of peoples’ experiences from their point of view” (Seidman, 1998, p. 112). Hence, the open-endedness of the questions allows for an tentative discussion of the issue. Also, further probes were used when there was the need to elicit fuller answers (Hopf, 2000).

Regarding the content of the questions, their formulation derived from the preceding literature review. They are four in total and as already mentioned aim at capturing the teachers’ perceptions of the standing of the speaking skill in the Greek state Primary school. More specifically, the first question seeks to elicit the interviewee’s overall perception of the issue and aims, through further probes, to invite her to provide a more general account of her opinion. The next question is targeted towards the issues already covered in previous sections (2.3, 2.4) and grapple with the teachers’ belief on the suitability of the activities offered to practise the speaking skill. Moving on to the third question, it serves to investigate the reasons why the speaking skill poses a difficulty for young learners at Primary school. Its open-ended nature invites teacher to reflect on the subject tapping into their teaching experience. Finally, the last question invites the participants to reflect broadly on the subject and adopt a more critical standpoint by providing their own tentative suggestions for remedial action they might take.

3.4 Procedure

The procedure commenced with the researcher approaching the four prospective participants. After informing them of the nature of the research and its requirements, they granted their permission so that the interviews could be recorded.

The interviews were carried out face-to-face at the school of four of the participants. A telephone session was arranged with the teacher from Crete on account of distance limitations. The interviews lasted for approximately 20 minutes each, were recorded and transcribed verbatim.
The final step of the procedure concerns the challenging stage of data analysis. The researcher took caution so as to ensure the validity and reliability of the research and that the instruments of measurement, namely interviews in this case, provided accurate results.

**Conclusion**

The third chapter of the thesis concerned the description of the research under scope. To this end, the interview questions were presented and the method, the sample, the instruments and the procedure were analyzed.

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4. **Presentation and discussion of the research findings**

**Introduction**

The fourth chapter of this study presents the research findings that were amassed from the interviews and discusses them with reference to the existing literature. In the section that follows, some representative participant responses are provided. The data obtained are views holistically and are analyzed using a thematic approach. The presentation of the findings will follow the sequence of the research questions as they were formulated in section 3.1 of the study. Thus, first the responses concerning the speaking skill and its status in the curriculum are presented followed by the answers provided on the suitability of the speaking tasks in the instructional materials. Then, the responses pertaining to the difficulties faced by pupils when practicing the speaking skill are thoroughly discussed. The analysis concludes with the suggestions offered by the teachers for the improvement of the status of the skill in question along with the enhancement of their own teaching practices.

4.1 **The speaking skill and its neglect in the last 3 grades**

The majority of the teachers responded affirmatively in the first question, admitting that the speaking skill is seemingly neglected in the last grades of Primary school compared to the fist three ones. As T1 put it: *‘Even if sometimes we don’t admit it, it is the sad truth. In my experience, teaching the little ones*
always comes with a lot of speaking, you know, songs, chants, we speak a lot, both us and the pupils. It’s important, you see, it’s what they should do when they start learning English for the first time. I mean, they can’t very well pick up a pencil and start writing dictation, can they?. T5 also added that ‘we, as teachers, are very much aware at the beginning of the school year that whoever gets the first and second grade is going to do more speaking and correct papers much less; it goes with the territory’. This view was also shared by the rest of the participants who agreed that the skill that takes center stage in TEYL is speaking. This is also showcased in the existing literature with leading researchers claiming that engaging young learners in oral interaction in the foreign language classroom and allowing them to discover language through appropriate oral tasks should be a prime concern (Moon, 2000, Cameron, 2001, Linse, 2002).

However, T2 went on to add that even though it is a fact that speaking is less practiced in grades 4, 5 and 6, it should not be like this because ‘actually, come to think of it, I know this is the case, but it shouldn’t really be like this, you know what I mean? The older pupils should speak as well during the lesson, speaking is so important. They should also have the opportunity to practise everything they have learnt. They know so many words by now, they know the grammar that is going to help them speak, they have so many ideas about the world, so many original and interesting things for us to hear, they should be given the opportunity. We need to encourage them, I know the books don’t really help, but there is so much that we can do with them, expose them to so much…. But unfortunately we don’t have the time for everything, we need to make a choice’.

The issue of time limitation was also raised by T5. In agreement with her fellow colleagues, she was more poignant in her comments: ‘This is absolutely true. It is neglected, definitely. We try not to forget about it completely, but we place much more emphasis on the other skills, reading and writing. As they grow up, they need to learn their grammar, vocabulary, they need to be able to write. This is very important as well and I think that we need to focus more on that. Of course, I realize speaking is also important and we need to practise it but the time we have is so limited and we there are so many pupils in the classes, we surely do not have enough time for everyone to do speaking work’. The matter of time constraint has also been raised in the literature, with Mattheoudakis and Nicolaides (2005) listing
it in the number of factors that relate to pupils’ tutorial schooling that may pose an obstacle to the desired learning outcomes in the foreign language classroom. Nevertheless, T4 differentiated her response to her colleagues by claiming that speaking ‘is not really neglected. It’s just different to how we teach it in the first three grades. The young ones sing, repeat, chant but they also use Greek as well. The older ones speak English quite a lot if you think about it. There are speaking activities in the books of course, but they also speak the language when they answer to the teacher, in their interaction with us. All those phrases they have learnt over the years and so many new ones they learn every day, they use them in order to communicate. Some of them are quite fluent’.

It thus becomes obvious from the responses provided above that the majority of the participants regard speaking as a neglected skill as pupils progress to the final grades of Primary school. They attribute this fact to various reasons, such as time limitations, large class sizes and, as T3 noted, class management issues. She remarked: ‘Let’s not forget that the older the pupils get, the more difficult it becomes to get them to behave. Speaking activities always raise noise levels in the classroom and the naughtiest ones find the opportunity to create mayhem. Especially when you decide to do a role play or a group activity from the ones in the textbook. It’s not so easy when you have a group of 25 pupils to get them settled and expect them to participate in an orderly fashion’. Actually, this point was raised by all teachers, with T1 pointing out that ‘it’s sometimes better to get them involved in written work than speaking; this way, the class will be calm’.

The class management concern is also reflected in the relevant literature by Evertson and Weinstein (2006), who acknowledge the importance of an orderly classroom environment for effective teaching practices. It is noteworthy that all participants admitted to using L1 for class management. As Littlewood (1981) claims, this is another factor that contributes to a reduction in the quantity and quality of oral production in the classroom since this means sacrificing valuable opportunities for well-motivated L2 use. What is more, it tends to devalue the foreign language as a means of communication because learners regard it as intended more for communicatively nonessential domains, such as grammar drills, while L1 is reserved as the most suitable means of addressing matters of more significant value. Regarding class size, Nye, Hedges & Konstantopoulos, (2000) have highlighted the fact that academic performance in young pupils is directly
correlated with it. Actually, smaller sized classes contribute to a heightened degree of interaction between the pupil and the teacher, a fact that invariably renders the lesson more personalized, teaching more immediate and responsive and relationships more sustained and purposeful (Blatchford, Baines, Kutnick & Martin, 2001; Garton, Copland & Burns, 2011).

Another recurring pattern that emerged from the participants’ responses was the one pertaining to the emphasis teachers place on the receptive skills as pupils move on to the 6th grade. All participants agree that there is a notable shift towards a teaching of the more “formal” structures of the language. Hence, grammar and vocabulary instruction as well as writing practice are prioritized over oral production. As T1 poignantly puts it, “we are expected to show results. The pupils need to bring homework home, along with their notebooks filled with written work. They need to do exercises, they need to write dictation”. Nevertheless, according the existing literature, “language is best learned when the learners’ attention is focused on understanding, saying and doing something with language, and not when their attention is focused explicitly on linguistic features” (Kumaravadivelu, 2003, p. 27). However, T3 goes on to add that the efficiency of the lesson and the suitability of the teacher are, on a large scale, assessed on the basis of “notebooks filled with written work, dictation, copy, tests. Parents expect it of us[…] otherwise, they think no work is done in the class. She attributes this abandon of speaking practice largely to parents’ beliefs of what constitutes effective language learning. She goes so far as to say that ‘it’s common knowledge that parents want to control everything. I don’t think they would be content if they didn’t see written proof of the work done in class[…] To their mind, their children will not learn the foreign language unless they do the written work’. It seems that this belief is so imprinted in parents’ mentality that it seems to have rubbed off on the pupils as well. T1 shared a recollection of a lesson where she had the pupils of the 6th grade perform a role play for the entirety of a teaching period. At the end of the lesson, some pupils were overheard remarking ‘Well, that was nice. No lesson done today’. This incident proves that even the pupils themselves do not assign the necessary importance to speaking practice.

The parents’ role has been raised in recent literature, with Alexiou & Mattheoudakis (2013) as well as Tzotzou (2014) suggesting that their beliefs and expectations often shape teaching practices. This is attributed to the fact that they
expect their children to be taught in a way that will lead to a certificate acquisition. Hence, they favor this type of “exam-encouraged instruction” (Alexiou & Mattheoudakis, 2013, p. 112) and anticipate teachers of the state school to assist in this goal.

4.2 The suitability of the instructional materials

The second question of this research aimed at investigating teachers’ opinions on the suitability of the instructional materials in terms of the speaking activities that they offer. The value of appropriate instructional materials in the learning process has been widely acknowledged. As is mentioned in the relevant literature, the textbook constitutes one of the most significant factors in determining the learner’s success in a language course (Garinger, 2002, Richards, 2001). Opinions were divided on this issue, since two participants affirmed their conviction that the textbooks provide sufficient oral practice while the other three felt that there was definitely room for improvement in the oral tasks. Most, however, agreed on the primary position that textbooks hold in their teaching practice. As T1 commented ‘I rely on the textbook almost entirely and I need it be structured in a way that makes my work easier’. Similarly, T4 added that a suitable textbook with adequate supplementary materials is “extremely important as it relieves me of the day to day preparation for the lesson’.

On the subject of suitability, T2 and T3 felt that there was ample practice of the speaking skill in the prescribed textbook, especially the ones for the first 3 grades. As T2 said: ‘There are speaking opportunities in almost all the tasks of the textbooks for the first 3 grades. Of course, the material is enough to practise the skill. I have never felt that it wasn’t[…] The same goes for the last 3 grades as well. There is a lot of role play, group work and pupils always engage in oral production before a reading or listening passage’. This statement is in keeping with the literature that supports the integration of speaking tasks in all stages of the lesson, thus highlighting their significance (Brown, 2004, Slattery and Willis, 2001). Moreover, T5 commented that the oral activities were appropriately designed, enjoyable and feasible to carry out in class. More specifically, she mentioned that ‘particularly for the first 4 grades, the oral tasks are really enjoyable both for the pupils but for us as well. The songs, especially in grades 3 and 4 are so catchy and they give such a joyful tone to the lesson. All pupils sing
along, even the most timid ones. That counts as speaking in my books, doesn’t it?’ Indeed, as is discussed in the relevant literature, oral production in class does not only involve formal speech production in the form of dialogues or exchanges in general. Especially when young learners are concerned, Cameron (2001) has stressed that participation in songs, rhymes and chants undoubtedly sets a solid foundation for the development of young learners’ discourse skills and constitute a necessary stepping stone towards more independent speech production. Furthermore, T3 referring to the material of the three grades, deemed it ‘very appropriate’ for the practice of the speaking skill. ‘Especially the stories for the young ones. They are so enjoyable, so nicely thought out. The illustrations are great as well, a pleasure to look at. They are not only for reading. We can use them as a way to practice speaking, either through repetition and retelling of the story or as way to initiate further discussion. I think it’s a great way to practice speaking. The children enjoy it, it’s interesting for them. It motivates them to participate’. As a matter of fact, T3 raises a number of salient issues that are also reflected in the existing literature. As was already mentioned in sections 2.3 and 2.4 of this study, successful speaking activities are designed around topics that are intrinsically motivating for the pupils, mirror their interests and are relevant for their needs (West, 2000; Richards, 2001; Hill, 2004). Also, stories as a way to practice the speaking skill have been hailed by Cameron (2001, p. 92) as a means to foster pupils’ vocabulary leaning strategies. In other words, a retelling or a discussion of a story can serve as a vehicle for vocabulary development by encouraging “prediction of the meanings of new words” and facilitating the “recycling of previously met words in varied contexts” (Cameron, 2001, p. 94-95). Proceeding to the answers of the other three participants, T1 and T4 shared the belief that ‘there is definitely room for improvement as far as speaking practice is concerned’ (T1). They felt that, particularly in grades 4, 5 and 6, speaking practice is not sufficient and it is somewhat neglected; even lay-out-wise, tasks are relegated to a far below corner of the book. Characteristically, T4 replied: ‘Especially for grades 5 and 6, I think the book does not help. Sure there are some tasks, but I prefer not to do them. The rubrics are quite complicated and pupils are not really interested. Mind you, even for me, it takes so long to set up and organize. I just prefer to do speaking in other ways’. When she was further probed
to elaborate on these ways, she answered: ‘I just incorporate it throughout the lesson as I go. We share our news, we talk about the weather, I ask them their opinions on a story or a text we might have done. These kinds of things’. As a matter of fact, interactional language production in a more unstructured way is put forward by many a scholar as a means of oral development (West, 2000; Brown, 2004).

She continues by saying: ‘Let’s not forget about classroom language. We mostly speak in English, be it when they ask something, for example to hand out the notebooks, or to be excused, when they want to come and write something on the board, all these things, they use English to communicate. I think it’s very important […] It’s not all about the textbook.’ As a matter of fact, speech production as it is described by T4, is predominantly purposeful and serves a communicative goal by engaging learners in meaningful exchanges (Walsh, 2002). After all, classroom discourse exhibits elements of authenticity and “real speech” (Hill, 2004, p. 320) and thus creates the conditions for real communication to take place (Hughes, 2002).

On the matter of the textbook not being the sole means of instruction, T1 was remarked that ‘even when the speaking tasks are not suitable and not helpful—sometimes they are quite confusing— we can always come up with our own ways to practise speaking[…] We can give them handouts, photocopies that are more interesting for them’. This view shared by both participants resonates in the relevant literature, with Williams (1983) acknowledging the textbook as vital tool in the teacher’s arsenal, albeit one that should “be used judiciously, since it cannot cater equally to the requirements of every classroom setting’’ (ibid, p.251).

On the nature of the speaking tasks themselves, T1 and T4 concurred that they lack the communicative nature for them to be considered meaningful. More specifically, T1 addressed the issue that they mostly serve as a vehicle for vocabulary development and grammar consolidation and are mainly incorporated as a prior stage to reading and listening activities, ‘Especially in the 4th and 5th grade, speaking tasks are mostly drills and repetitions of grammar and vocabulary already taught’ (T1). T1 proceeded to add: ‘I don’t think they are very original. When you think about speaking, you automatically think about a conversation, discussion, ideas … Most of the tasks included in the textbooks seem so guided, with vocabulary already given, with the grammar to be used already
explained… I don’t know, they seem quite forced to me’. It is evident that what the participants refer to is a tight control of the speaking output with a firm focus on accuracy, rather than fluency (Johnson, 1996; West, 2000; Hedge, 2004). As was mentioned in section 2.5 of this study, learners engaging in such form-focused practice are highly likely to “meet grave problems of transfer when they try to communicate outside the classroom” (Johnson, 1996, p. 161).

4.3 Difficulties learners face in oral practice and participants’ suggestions for the improvement of the situation

This discussion of the research findings so far has revealed the participants’ perceptions of the status of the speaking skill across all grades of Primary school, as well as their opinions of the suitability of the prescribed instructional materials. This final section offers an account of the most common speaking difficulties that learners face when they try to engage in speaking the classroom, along with the teachers’ tentative suggestions of how to overcome them and ultimately improve oral practice.

On the subject of the speaking difficulties learners face, the participants’ responses converged on the following issues: inhibition, lack of topical knowledge, unwillingness to participate and mother-tongue use.

To begin with, inhibition is acknowledged as the prime obstacle in learners’ oral production. According to Krashen (1982), it is related to the affective variables, along with anxiety and motivation that have been acknowledged to play an important role in language acquisition. As T1 commented: ‘The way I see it, children are afraid to make mistakes, so they prefer not to speak in English. They choose to stay silent and not take the risk.’ T2 added: ‘Let’s not forget that kids are sensitive, they don’t like to expose themselves in front of their classmates. They prefer not to say anything at all than run the risk of making a mistake and possible embarrassing themselves in front of their classmates.’ As a matter of fact, speaking can sometimes result in anxiety. According to Bashir, Azeem & Dogar, (2011), this kind of stress may lead to despondence and a feeling of underachievement in learners.

On the same note, Woodrow (2006) highlights the negative effect that performance anxiety can have on the overall oral performance of young learners. Characteristically, T5 commented that ‘children are afraid of making mistakes. To
their mind, a mistake is a proof of failure. It’s something that must be avoided at all costs’. The issue of errors has been widely explored in the existing literature (Harmer, 1991; Baker and Westrup, 2003). In the context of the EFL classroom, the majority of errors occur due to negative transfer, that is the process of overgeneralization of the mother tongue’s rules on L2. However, errors should not be regarded as a “weakness to be eradicated” but rather as “constructive and positive signs of experimenting with the new language and indices of active learning” (Bouniol, 2004, p. 154).

Another point made by T5 was that ‘it’s true that children don’t want to put themselves out there in the classroom by making mistakes[...]especially the weaker ones choose to be silent instead of running the risk of being criticized by their peers, in particular the stronger ones.’ This very point is widely reflected in today’s large, mixed-ability classes of Greek state schools. As was mentioned in section 1.1.5 of this study, the heterogeneity of classes is a direct result of the lack of diagnostic tests in Primary school (Tzotzou, 2014). Therefore, learners are divided into two groups, strong and weak ones, with the former dominating oral activities and the latter resorting to silence, fearful of criticism (Mahripian, 2014).

Finally, another factor that teachers acknowledged as posing a challenge in oral production is lack of topical knowledge, as well as limited lexical background and grammar structures. Topical knowledge refers to the speakers’ knowledge of related topical information stored in the short-term memory that enables them to apply language in accordance with the context in which they operate at any given time (Bachman and Palmer, 1996). ‘Often pupils complain that they cannot remember anything to say, the right words elude them’. Similarly, grammatical competence allows speakers to perceive and correctly apply the structural principles of language to their speech so that they produce fluent and coherent utterances (Latha, 2012). ‘Even if they know what to say, they don’t know how to say it. They struggle to form the sentences, to apply the correct grammar rules, to use the right tense’, T2 remarked. As a matter of fact, all the participants referred to this difficulty in their answers. Characteristically, T3 said: ‘I think that this makes it more difficult for the older pupils than the little ones. I mean, the little ones are more spontaneous in their speaking and not knowing the right word or the right way to say something is not going to hold them back. Let’s not forget, that our expectations are not as high compared to the older ones[...] But pupils in
the 4th or 5th grade find it really hard to express themselves and their ideas. It’s as though the moment they start to speak, they instantly forget everything they have learned!’ This fact results in feelings of frustration and exasperation, which in turn leads to demotivation and future inhibition in speaking in the foreign language (Littlewood, 2007).

Regarding the measures teachers take in their classes so as to address the aforementioned difficulties, the participants’ answers manifested a tendency for both reparatory and preventive action.

Addressing the inhibition and low self esteem issues, the majority opts for the creation of a supportive environment where learners experience a feeling of inclusion free form judgment and criticism. As T4 said: ‘I try to create a supportive atmosphere. I try to instill in all my pupils that they should treat each other with respect’. T1 remarked: ‘I do my best to encourage all pupils to speak; I try to show them through my attitude that I value everyone’s contributions. This way, they feel that their voice really matters [...] their confidence grows and it’s easier for them to speak up in front of the class’. The participants’ views are in keeping with Ellis’ (1996, p. 7) claim that “learners need chance to say what they think or feel and to experiment in a supportive atmosphere using language they have heard or seen without feeling threatened”.

On the subject of errors, opinions vary on the way participants address them in their practice. T3 admitted to correcting them on the spot, especially grammar ones, as they believe that ‘you can’t let a grammar mistake uncorrected. Otherwise, the pupils will not learn how to speak correctly’. T4 agreed by adding: ‘I don’t really mind vocabulary mistakes. But the grammar ones I correct immediately, it’s important that they learn the rules’. This is a representative example of structural and immediate feedback where the grammar and pronunciation error is dealt with as soon as the pupils makes it (West, 2000). The aforementioned views comply with the accuracy over fluency paradigm, whose principles exemplify a firm focus on form, even at the expense of fluency. However, such a structuralist orientation has been widely cautioned against as it views speaking as an exercise in producing sentences exemplifying grammatical accuracy and not as a “discourse skill in this own right” (Hill, 2004, p. 330; Bygate, 2001).
On the other hand, T1, T2, and T5 responded that they did not correct the pupils mid-speech because they felt that that would obstruct their natural flow and quite possibly damage their confidence. As T2 put it, ‘no, I would never interrupt their speech with a correction. The most important thing for them is to speak, to get their point across. This is the only way they can believe in themselves[…].’ No, interrupting a pupil while he’s making an effort to speak goes against everything I believe’. 

Notwithstanding their attitude to errors, all participants’ answers assign special significance to positive feedback. ‘I always make a point of highlighting what the pupils do well in an activity, their accomplishments. I try not to focus on mistakes they might have made but rather on what they managed to do well’ (T2). T4 agrees by saying: ‘Feedback needs to be positive, I realize that, especially for the younger ones, so as not to demotivate them. Especially when speaking is concerned, otherwise the pupils might not want to participate anymore’. The issue of feedback is also explored in the relevant literature. As West (2000) purports, the teacher’s positive attitude is reflected in the type of feedback she uses; bringing forward the accomplishments of the learners in an encouraging way is bound to boost their confidence and create a positive learning environment. 

Addressing the problem of mixed ability classes, teachers acknowledged it as an ‘inevitable truth’ (T4). However, they claimed that it can also be a blessing in disguise, as they have witnessed instances in heterogeneous classes where weaker students were taken under the wing, so to speak, by the stronger ones and were encouraged and helped in their efforts. As T3 said: ‘It’s not always a bad thing. Quite often the better pupils help and support the weaker ones. Sure, sometimes they just whisper the right answer to them, which is not what you really want, but I’ve seen them being quite supportive of them, especially in group activities.’ 

On the same subject, T1 suggested that a way to use heterogeneity to the learners’ advantage is to create groups comprising ‘an equal ratio of weaker and stronger pupils’. This way, any potentially damaging discrepancies in cognitive behaviour can be minimized. As a matter of fact, group work has been put forward by many experts as very beneficial especially regarding oral practice. Given the fact that the very nature of the speaking skill lies in communication and exchange of ideas, it should come as no surprise that the obvious way to accomplish this is by engaging learners in group or pair work. In this way, the classroom environment
can be exploited as a social context and the amount and variety of language production is increased as is the amount of input obtained (West, 2000, Brown, 2004).

Finally, regarding the measures participants take to address the difficulties relating to limited vocabulary and grammatical background, responses varied but centered on the same axis of using the appropriate instructional techniques. More specifically, on the subject of vocabulary, three teachers that they provided older learners with structural cues in the form of useful words, model phrases or even clauses. T4 characteristically said: ‘I always try to simplify the speaking task and break it down for the pupils. After reading the rubric and explaining the activity, I write words lists, like adjectives, useful verbs and set phrases that they children can use’. T1 took this a step further by admitting to ‘providing them with model answers written on the board. I think that this kind of help is necessary for the weaker pupils because it takes a lot of their anxiety away’. Despite the fact that this method is criticized in the relevant literature on the grounds that such lists are more often than not incomplete, “presented out of context” and represent “a sheer fraction of what is possible in real life interactions” (Hughes, 2002, p. Section 3.3), they still seem to be the preferred method of choice for many teachers.

Conclusion

In the fourth chapter of the study, the research findings were thoroughly presented and analyzed and representative extracts from the interviews were offered. Firstly, the negligence of the speaking skill in the last three grades was discussed. Then, the suitability of the instructional materials was investigated. The chapter concluded with an exploration of the difficulties that pupils face in practicing the speaking skill and the steps that instructors take in order to address them in their teaching practice.
5. Implications, limitations and suggestions for future research

Introduction

In the fifth chapter of this study, some final points are discussed. First, the implications raised by the findings of this research are presented. Then, the limitations of the research are described. The chapter concludes with some tentative suggestions for future research.

5.1 Implications

This thesis focused on the speaking skill and its status throughout the 6 grades of the Greek state Primary school. To this end, five teachers were interviewed with the view to gain a deeper understanding of the treatment of the skill as well as the challenges that pupils face in their efforts to practise it in the classroom. The research, which followed the qualitative paradigm, has brought forward some interesting implications.

Firstly, it becomes apparent from the research findings that the speaking skill is indeed neglected as pupils progress from the 4th to the 6th grade of school. The
interviews revealed the multitude of reasons why this negligence transpires. As was analyzed in Chapter 4 of this study, the reasons include a notable shift of focus from the productive to the receptive skills. Most teachers attribute this shift to a tacit belief – shared by parents, pupils and stakeholders alike – that as pupils progress in their study of language, the emphasis is placed more on reading and writing as this is considered the appropriate way to learn the specifics of the foreign language. Also, teachers suggest that this focus on form orientation is also adopted by the instructional materials, whose organization prioritized more structural activities. Despite the fact that the consensus among participants is that the speaking skill is adequately covered in the first three grades, its presence is decreased in the instructional materials for grades 4, 5 and 6. According to them, the activities offered display a firm focus on form, are quite complicated, lack the communicative element and mostly serve as vehicles for vocabulary revision and grammar consolidation.

Actually, the aforementioned facts are directly correlated with a recurring answer given by the participants relating to a shortage of time. All teachers attribute the negligence of speaking practice to the fact that, as priority is assigned to the coverage of the textbook topics emphasizing reading and writing, insufficient time is left for speaking.

Finally, another implication raised by this research is that the speaking skill in the foreign language classroom is largely influenced by affective factors, such as anxiety, low self-esteem and inhibition. This is especially true for the older pupils who, fearful of criticism in case they make mistakes, prefer not to participate.

It is the researcher's aspiration that the results of the study can offer a deeper insight into the nature of the speaking skill and the ways it can be constructively integrated in instruction throughout all grades of Primary school. Hopefully, the findings of this research can prove useful to teachers, pupils and stakeholders alike.

5.2 Limitations, suggestions for further research and recommendations

5.2.1. Limitations of the current research
It is important to concede that there are some limitations to this research. First and foremost, it needs to be acknowledged that the size of the sample was rather small. Despite the fact that sample selection was in compliance with the qualitative paradigm, a larger sample would be needed to validate the generalizability of the findings.

Moreover, another factor that could possibly challenge the credibility of the results of this research pertains to the homogeneity of the sample. Participants were all female, working in urban areas of Greece and with a similar teaching experience. Also, the fact that all of them hold permanent posts may be regarded by some as having different gravitas to a substitute teacher’s status and, given the vast number of the latter’s posts at schools, may not accurately represent the larger teacher population.

Finally, the thematizing and coding of the data collected was conducted manually and not via a professional software program. Thus, given the challenging nature of the task, allowances might need to be made for potential omissions and errors in data gathering.

5.2.2. Suggestions for future research

In light of the aforementioned limitations, one might suggest that researches be conducted, this time comprising a larger and potentially more representative sample. Given the importance of the speaking skill in foreign language instruction, teachers and stakeholders alike would most definitely benefit from a larger-scale research on the oral skill in a TEYL context. As a matter of fact, such a research could employ a mixed methodology, combining both qualitative and quantitative instruments for data collection. Therefore, the findings of the present study can be validated and in the event of the research producing different results, a comparative analysis may be performed. In this way, a deeper understanding into the components that enable young learners to achieve communication can be achieved.

5.2.3. Recommendations

In this section some recommendations are offered for improving current speaking teaching practices in the Greek state school.
To begin with, teachers should take action in order to address the speaking difficulties their learners’ experience. First and foremost, it is necessary that they acknowledge the existence of feelings of anxiety and inhibition in the foreign language classroom. To combat these negative affective variables, the teacher needs to provide a friendly, supportive and learner–centered classroom environment where the pupils can engage in oral practice without feeling threatened and under scrutiny. Also, language practitioners should strive to build learners’ self-confidence by creating the conditions for them to succeed in oral practice. In other words, they should provide them with activities that do not set them up to fail, are within their cognitive capacities and can be completed successfully. Another recommendation is to design tasks that help build the students' character, nurture initiative and foster leadership skills, for instance problem-solving, decision making and team building to name but a few.

Regarding the instructional materials for grades 4, 5 and 6, the findings of this research reveal a need for their adaptation in order to include more communicative speaking tasks with a focus on fluency rather than accuracy. Moreover, learners should be engaged in meaningful oral activities with a tangible and clear outcome in intrinsically motivating subjects that mirror their interests.

Addressing the issue of the shortage of time that many teachers mentioned, a more flexible perspective needs to be adopted, so that the teachers do not feel so compelled to adhere blindly to curriculum requirements dictating the coverage of all units by the end of the school year. Finally, the focus of all those involved in language teaching should be steered towards a balanced practice of all skills and the belief that reading and writing are prioritized over speaking should be gradually done away with.

**Conclusion**

The final chapter of the dissertation discussed the implications raised by the present research, as well as its limitations. Finally, the chapter concluded with some tentative suggestions for further research and recommendations for the improvement of current teaching practices.
Conclusion

The aim of this thesis was to explore the status that the speaking skill has in the context of the Greek state Primary school and to investigate whether or not its practice is neglected as pupils progress from the 1st to the 6th grade. In order to achieve this, a research was designed following the quantitative paradigm and four interviews questions were formulated. The sample was chosen and consisted of five experienced English teachers teaching in Primary schools in Athens and Crete.

The four interview questions sought to explore the participants’ views on whether or not the speaking skill was neglected towards the last grades of school, the suitability of the instructional materials in terms of the speaking activities offered, the difficulties pupils experienced in speaking and the measures the participants took in order to address these difficulties.

The findings that arose from the participants’ responses were quite illuminative and in many cases in correlation to the relevant literature. More specifically, all participants agreed that the emphasis that was placed on the speaking skill was more pronounced in the first three grades of school compared to the last three ones. This apparent neglect was attributed to a number of reasons, namely shortage of time, an over emphasis on the receptive skills in the last 3 grades and inhibition and linguistic difficulties on the part of the pupils. Also, special reference was made to the instructional materials, which were found to lessen the significance of speaking tasks in grades 4, 5 and 6 in favor of activities of a more structural orientation.

Moreover, the implications and limitations of the research were discussed and various recommendations were made for rectifying the situation. Finally, this study concludes with suggestions for further research that would benefit oral development in all grades of state Primary schools.
References


Appendix I

The interview questions

- To what extent do EFL teachers believe that the speaking skill is neglected as pupils progress to the last three grades of school, compared to the first three ones? If so, where is it attributed?
- Is the speaking skill adequately covered in the activities offered by the textbooks in all grades of Primary school?
- What kind of difficulties do pupils face in practicing the speaking skill in the classroom?
- How are difficulties in teaching speaking dealt with in the classroom?
Appendix II
The proposed speaking tasks in the instructional materials for the first three grades
Appendix III
The proposed speaking tasks in the instructional materials for the last three grades
Lesson 2  At the school lab

1. Speaking

A. Work in pairs. Look at the pictures below and tell your partner what your favourite school subjects are and why?

Examples
- I like History because I like learning about past events.
- I like Music because it’s relaxing.
- I like Geography because it’s fun.
- I like Science because I like experiments.
- I like Maths because it’s challenging.

B. Do you agree with your partner’s opinion? Give your reasons.

2. Listening

Today the pupils are at the school lab, working on different projects on their computers. The teacher is checking their work.

A. Look at the picture and listen to the pupils talking. What subjects are they working on? Tick the right picture in Activity 1A above.
3. Practice

**A. Pair Work: What’s in your shopping bag?**
You are at the supermarket with your friend. Put 5 things in your shopping bag but don’t let your friend see what’s in it. Ask each other questions to find out what’s in your friend’s bag and write them down.

**Examples:**
- Have you got any apples in your shopping bag?
- No, I haven’t.
- Have you got any bananas?
- Yes, I have.
- How many have you got?
- Five.

**My Shopping Bag**
- bananas / 5

**My Friend’s Shopping Bag**
- milk / 1 carton

**B. Role-play: A shop in the classroom**
Form two groups, shopkeepers and customers, and act out this activity.

Shopkeepers
Organize your shop. Prepare pictures of goods and price tags for them. Display them on your desks. Get ready to welcome your customers.

Customers
Prepare your shopping lists and go shopping.

**Learning Strategies**
- When I speak English in class...
- I do not hesitate to speak.
- I start the conversation with my classmates.
- I am not afraid to make mistakes.
- I try to remember dialogues I have learnt by heart.
- I ask for correction.

**C. At the school canteen**
Read the menu of the school canteen on p.135.

You have €2.50. Choose your treats but stay within your budget.

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<th>What to buy</th>
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**Total:** €
**List of Abbreviations & Acronyms**

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<thead>
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<th>Description</th>
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<tbody>
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<td>EFL</td>
<td>English as a Foreign Language</td>
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<tr>
<td>TEFL</td>
<td>Teaching English as a Foreign Language</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TEYL</td>
<td>Teaching English to Young Learners</td>
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<tr>
<td>PEAP (ΠΕΑΠ)</td>
<td>Πρόγραμμα Εκμάθησης της Αγγλικής στην Πρώιμη Παιδική Ηλικία</td>
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